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ABSTRACT

During the spring of 1993, a needs assessment was conducted in rural Kansas communities to determine existing services and community strengths available to special needs children. Interviews were conducted with a cross section of the community regarding community resources, collaboration, parent and family involvement, planning processes, and educational funding. Secondary special education students offered their views concerning the effectiveness of special education services. Themes that emerged include: (1) motivation to learn when offered alternative styles of learning; (2) desire to participate in noncompetitive school activities, especially athletics; (3) sense of being different and misunderstood by both school personnel and other students; (4) desire to participate in planning for themselves; (5) additional needed support for parents; and (6) life goals of independence, a good job, a good income, and having a family. Survey results also indicate that schools felt the pressure of inadequate funding to meet the rising costs of special education; teachers saw the lack of space and resources as prohibitive in providing alternative learning experiences; and staff felt that they were inclusive of parents in program planning and implementation. However, parents saw schools as inflexible in arranging meeting times and felt that too many children were expelled from school or removed from school activities as a source of punishment. Results suggest that improved communication and understanding of the needs of all parties involved would help improve special education programming. (LP)

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VOICES OF THE CHILDREN: WHAT SPECIAL EDUCATION KIDS SAY ABOUT THEIR PROGRAMMING EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS

In the spring of 1993, an extensive needs assessment was conducted across rural communities in the state of Kansas, in an effort to determine the existing services and community strengths available to multi-needs children. This process originated as part of the funding initiative through a grant to develop wrap around services. The purpose of this assessment was to determine how these pilot communities could be assisted in better serving these children and their families. As part of the assessment, interviews were conducted with a cross section of community persons using a set of 28 preestablished questions under five main areas of interest. Those areas included introductory and general questions about the community, collaborative bodies and interagency teams, parent and family involvement, planning process, and funding.

Like many rural areas, Kansas has been faced with a rising population of special needs children, a demand for effective, creative services and a decrease in resources available to meet the demand. Further, traditional services no longer seem to address the issues faced by multi-problem youth today, creating a professional quandary for those invested in assisting these children.

Interestingly, the children in this study were able to offer some insights into how they could better benefit from the attempts at intervention into their difficulties. Consistent themes emerged as the children shared their experiences and observations regarding their special education experiences more than any other aspect of their treatment, indicating that their school experience may be a very powerful influence in their daily lives. These young people offered insight into their behaviors and resistances to the interventions that were being offered in the classroom, in the school and in the community. Themes which emerged included a motivation to learn via support of alternative styles of learning in the classroom; a desire to participate in school activities, yet in noncompetitive programming, especially in the area of athletic programs; a sense of being different and misunderstood by school personnel and students alike; a desire to participate in planning for themselves; needed support for parents, and life goals of independence, a good job, making good money, and having a family.

Motivation to learn. "Success is getting good grades, keeping my morals and staying on track", as one youth put it, encompassing the consistent sentiment of the youth in this study. The desire to be successful in school was evident, yet for many seemed far too difficult to achieve. Many believed they were not getting the help they needed with their school work, not because their teachers didn't care but because they recognized that their learning styles did not fit the

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traditional didactic approach. One child suggested that it would be helpful to get more assistance in the classroom because " I ask too many questions for my teachers." Another child pointed out that he really liked learning but "I don't like sitting - I need hands on, activity learning." The issues of applied learning were systematic across interviews. Further, children recognized that they were different (translate: difficult) and assumed the "blame" for not being able to respond and achieve in the manner they would like.

Feeling different and misunderstood. When asked what they would most like to change about their education experience, these youth overwhelmingly stated that they felt different and misunderstood by school personnel and students alike. "Change the people - their attitudes, their judgments. Make them nicer. Change my self esteem." " I would go live on an island where there are lots of animals and hardly any people. Animals are nicer." "Success means being able to find people who understand." These children suggested that there be more counseling in the halls and teacher support when there are difficulties. They felt that such interventions would help them to maintain control when they felt ridiculed by the other students. There was a theme of being blamed for disruptions because they were less capable of handling the stress of provocation, although they rarely started the altercations. Many felt that staff at the schools were rude to them and unapproachable. All of them did, however, feel that there were some teachers specifically within their program who were supportive and approachable. There was also a sense of segregation from the mainstream i.e. different lunch hours, segregated locker areas.

Desire to participate in school activities. The youth in this study wanted very much to be a part of their school's activities. They felt that coaches were intolerant of them, and because of their special needs, they were excluded from organized sports. Further, these kids suggested that there needed to be organized sports and recreational programs that were geared for fun and not competition. Since the two main sources of recognition and success in the traditional school system are academics and athletics, these youth felt especially excluded.

Desire to participate in planning. As with most junior high and high school students, these participants had a desire to develop some sense of agency in their lives. They did not feel that they had any say in what was happening for them in the school system. While the children did acknowledge that their parents *sometimes* asked them for their input and *sometimes* listened to them, they gave no credit to professionals in this area. Moreover, as one youth stated: "I don't get asked much. When I say no, I still have to do it anyway." These children believed that the school did care about them but felt that there was no follow through on any plans that were developed for them. Some described the school system as "too lazy to do anything"; others saw them as all talk.

Support for parents. Parents were seen as having to work too hard to get services for their children. An overall sentiment among these children was the fact that there should be more help for parents i.e. transportation, respite, and local resources. These kids did feel that their parents had access to school personnel but were totally unaware of any collaborative efforts between parents and professionals. There was a prevailing attitude of professionals vs. parents, with the youth feeling particularly defensive for their parents.

Life goals. The expressed life goals of these children were really no different from those of the average youth today. These goals included independence, getting a good job and making good money, and having a family. Frustrations included the lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, with the few jobs going to the most "capable". Again, issues of self esteem were impacted by this exclusion in the job market. Alternative school placements (private, parochial, a district outside of their home school) were the norm with many of these youth, yet one of their main goals was to be able to successfully attend public school.

Comparison with adult viewpoints. Much in line with their children, parents felt that the schools were not meeting their children's educational needs. Many felt that the IEP did not meet the child's needs but was not followed anyway. Although parents were involved in the meetings regarding their children, they did not feel included in the decision making process. They felt that they were not listened to, that the schools dictated to them what would happen, that they were not made aware of options for programming, and that there was often an adversarial position on the part of the school. They saw the schools as too easily willing to let their child fail. Collaboration was often seen as finger pointing. Parents and children expressed very similar experiences and perceptions. It seems that the parents' anxiety exacerbated the anxiety of the youth and vice versa, creating a vicious cycle that inhibits effective navigation of the system.

Schools felt the pressure of rising costs and caseload sizes in special education while funding was not keeping up with demand. Teachers were very aware of the need for alternative programming, but saw the lack of space and resources as prohibitive. Further, schools felt that they were very inclusive of parents in all aspects of planning and implementation.

Community people saw schools as inflexible in arranging meeting times and allowing teachers the time to work on special planning for a child with difficulties. They felt that too many children were expelled from school or removed from school activities as a source of punishment. The importance of parental and child involvement was recognized by the community as a whole but was not acted upon in most cases.

IMPLICATIONS

It is apparent that the school is the focal point of intervention for parents, children and service providers. School is seen as having the most potential for immediate impact and is thus more quickly identified as a source of concern. With children spending a large part of their day in the school setting, those with special needs require a number of resources traditionally not available in the school. Today the educational system is being asked to provide social and emotional services along with the academic mandates. Since teachers and other school personnel are traditionally trained to provide the academics, rather than expect teachers to be "jacks of all trades" (and masters of none), there are people in the community who are trained to provide services to round out the socialization/educational process required in today's world.

The findings of this study suggest that the service recipients feel misunderstood, disenfranchised, and blame themselves for not being able to respond to traditional approaches in education. Children and their parents both experience a sense of exclusion in the process of planning and feel that they are often blamed for the difficulties encountered in servicing this

population. It may be that these children are parroting their parents' sense of disillusionment. Or it may be that the parents have become hypersensitive and protective due to the reports of their children's experiences. Or it may be that both are actually experiencing similar situations when working with the school system. This is not to say that this is intentional, in fact, from the schools' perceptions, parents and children were included in all aspects of planning and service provision. More likely, this indicates a lack of communication and understanding of the needs of all parties involved. Finding ways to better hear the families involved in special education services and to support and acknowledge efforts and struggles may the major step necessary to improve the responses of children to special education programming.

When families and professionals come together around a difficult problem such as special education services for multiproblem youth, there is a tendency to view each party as separate and distinct, imposing artificial boundaries resulting in assumptions that may or may not be accurate. For example, in this study, children assumed that the school system was "too lazy" to follow through on any planning. Parents assumed that the school did not want to deal with differences in students. School personnel assumed that if parents did not attend scheduled meetings, they did not care. It is often the case that it is not the situation that is problem i.e. need for special services, but rather the communication about the need that creates the problem. It is important to focus on keeping the involvement collaborative rather than heirarchical. As a matter of course, many of the participating communities relied on the court systems and child welfare to provide the impetus for parental co-operation. There was consistently expressed surprise that parents were as quickly co-operative as they were when simply asked to be involved in meetings and planning. The use of strength focus, respectful interactions and hospitable interchanges stood out as the most effective ways of eliciting family co-operation.

It is not enough to simply be invited to meetings, as the parents and children have told us. It is also important that all of the members have an equal voice in the planning and access to information regarding available services. The goal is to allow all of the participants to express their views. Multiple perspectives will bring on a wider perspective of the problem, allowing for the clarification of inaccurate assumptions and the forging of a more effective process to working with the multiproblem child in the school setting. Children, parents and school personnel all operate from the same goal - maximizing the educational potential of special needs children. Frustration generally results when all parties do not feel heard and respected. each group brings to the process their own expertise about the problem at hand and, if heard, can contribute to the resolution of the difficulty and meeting of the common goal.

CONCLUSION

The strengths of special education programs in rural Kansas seem to lie in the area of communicating caring to the student. Teachers who are available and supportive are a consistent theme within programming, whereas teachers outside of the program are inconsistently approachable. While students believed that the school cared about them, they did not feel that their education needs were being met, nor did they feel entitled to ask for services they thought would be helpful. Specifically, the majority of the issues related to difficulty for these youth had to do with communication and understanding - inclusion, respect, self esteem. Teachers and

school personnel cannot do it all, nor can the youth or parents. They can, however, actualize their desire to assist children in special education to meet their personal and academic goals through collaborative interaction and open communication.